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AUTHOR Pickert, Sarah M.
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ABSTRACT

This brief report summarizes a longer document with the same title. The report discusses the response of colleges and universities in the United States to the needs of graduate students to become equipped to make personal and and public policy decisions as citizens of an international society. It notes that curriculum changes in higher education are showing greater enhancements of the international experience in the classroom and a tightening of foreign language standards. Federal spending in undergraduate study abroad has also increased substantially, as well as the U.S. commitment to working with the Economic Community and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization to standardize educational credential reporting, licensing, and certification. Steps that faculty and administrators can take in this environment include widening the curriculum to expose students to other cultures, widening opportunities for international contact, and evaluating organizational structures that help or hinder international activities. Contains six references. (GLR)

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Preparing for a Global Community

Achieving an International Perspective in Higher Education

Sarah M. Pickert

With the world integrated by economics, communications, transportation, and politics, Americans increasingly see that they live and work in a global marketplace of goods, services, and ideas. Policy makers and the public want educational programs to reflect the international ties that bind people as they bind nations. Colleges and universities must produce graduates who know other cultural histories, languages, and institutions. American institutions must work harder to broaden understanding of world events by offering the perspectives of other cultures.

The challenge to educators is to deliver graduates who are competent not only to function professionally in an international environment, but who are equipped to make personal and public-policy decisions as citizens of an international society.

American higher education is meeting this challenge in many ways. Some institutions include their goals for international education in campuswide strategic plans. Others incorporate comparative and international assessments into individual disciplines. Core curricula are being altered to ensure that all students know more about the languages and cultures of other countries. Faculty-development opportunities are being created to help implement these changes. American students are being encouraged to study abroad, and foreign and American students with international experiences are being asked to bring their backgrounds to the fore.

Administrators are devising new structures for coordinating increased international activities. Many institutions are joining consortia to work on international projects with local, national, and international businesses and organizations; such programs increasingly are planned and assessed in a multinational context.

For consistent reference, the term "international higher education" represents international relations (study of relations among countries), area studies (study of particular regions of the world), foreign languages and cultures, comparative and international approaches to individual disciplines, and environmental, global, or peace studies, which examine issues affecting more than one nation. These education efforts can extend to every discipline and professional school, weaving together academic institutions, private nonprofit entities, businesses, local and national governments, and public and private international organizations.

In the 1990s, higher education has had to adjust to a more competitive world economy, increased access to and interest in the world at large, and globe-spanning electronic databases and computer networks. The decentralized nature of American higher education allows state and private institutions to make contact with educators abroad, bring curricula into consonance with job requirements, and devise ways to carry out the international aspects of institutional missions.

But other nations view international education differently. Shaped by geography and history, national concerns guide the responses of these countries to the content and form of international education. As colleges and universities worldwide expand joint educational endeavors, they influence one another's views of and participation in this field.

How Is International Education Included in Curricula?

Once focused on improving the international expertise of language majors and foreign-affairs experts, American colleges and universities now strive to teach all students about other countries and cultures. Language is not being ignored; standards for language proficiency are being tightened, and requirements for languages and study or work abroad are cropping up in professional programs. On the wider scale, institutions are revising general-education courses; for example, nonwestern countries get broader coverage in history and civilization courses. Depth and breadth of curricular applications vary, but this trend is evident among two-year, four-year, and graduate programs.

Throughout the curriculum, faculty are including material from other countries—books, films, videos, music, newspapers, even live satellite broadcasts. A few institutions make academic experience gained abroad part of the domestic curriculum by requiring enrollment in seminars, research work, or demonstrations of bilingual proficiency. Some offer certificates or joint degrees to students who complete a series of such courses.

It also is possible to have an international experience without leaving the classroom, thanks to advances in computer and satellite communication. American students now can interact directly with their counterparts throughout the world. Efforts to merge educational databases might improve access to research or curricular activities in other countries.

Who Studies Abroad?

More students in higher education are studying outside their home countries. In European Community nations, student mobility is increasing; an ERASMUS project goal is to enable by 1992 at least 10 percent of EC students to acquire academic training in another member state. Educators and administrators at U.S. institutions want to match this goal, increasing the diversity of students who participate and the number of countries offered as choices.

In a major U.S. government initiative, the National Security Education Act of 1991 tripled federal spending on undergraduate study abroad. The law provides more money for overseas graduate research and grants to support programs in international and area studies and foreign languages.

Analyzing study abroad from a cross-national perspective, institutions can compare the experiences of American students abroad with study-abroad programs sponsored by other countries.

The United States draws more foreign exchange students than any country, but the numbers and destinations of foreign students are shifting (Chandler 1989). Asian students, who make up the majority of foreign students enrolled in U.S. institutions, are being wooed with some success by Australia, Japan, and other nations.

How Is International Education Administered?

Amid dramatic budget reductions, U.S. campuses are fielding demands for a curriculum more deeply infused with international and multicultural components, for greater access to study abroad, and for closer cooperation with multinational businesses. Institutions are deepening ties to institutions in other countries, coordinating programs through international-studies offices or campuswide committees, and cooperating with state and regional consortia (Anderson 1988).

At the international level, U.S. representatives are working with EC and United National Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) authorities to standardize educational credential reporting, licensing, and certification. In a gesture likely to bring more students across more borders, these bodies are trying to ease student mobility across national educational systems and develop databases to facilitate exchange of needed information (European Center for Higher Education 1987). The EC leads efforts to create a comprehensive structure to administer international higher education. As higher education follows other industries into the global market, governments are looking with increased regulatory fervor upon joint educational business ventures (Chambers and Cummings 1990).

How Can Faculty and Administrators Improve International Education?

The first step is to define the term. Clarify its meaning on your campus. Raise the concept on campus: see if "international education" as you understand it is backed by institutional policies toward international and foreign-language studies, foreign students, and faculty development.

Curriculum. Consider the extent to which your institution exposes students to other languages and cultures. Are international elements available even in professional schools? Do students acquire the foreign-language proficiency demanded in their chosen fields? Do all students get the chance to study abroad and to use that experience in later course work? Compare your institution's offering with those of colleges and universities in other countries.

Participants. Widen opportunities for international contact by reducing barriers to foreign study created by scheduling and academic requirements. Bring foreign students and teachers to the United States, and use international satellite and telecommunications in the classroom. Examine your own program in light of the efforts of other countries to send and receive students from abroad.

Administration. Evaluate structures that help or hinder international activities. Does a campuswide strategy exist to promote such efforts? Does a comprehensive document report these activities? Are measures of progress adequately communicated to the campus? Are course offerings, faculty hirings, and grant proposals coordinated with other institutions in your community, state, or region? Consider how other countries administer programs and how you might coordinate your efforts on an international scale.

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The George Washington University
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